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# **Work-Based (not Classroom) Learning as the Apt Preparation for the Practice of Management**

A Paper by

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## ***Work-Based (not Classroom) Learning*** **as the Apt Preparation for the Practice of Management**

*-- By Joe Raelin*

I have long been an exponent of work-based learning as a most expeditious way to take advantage of the idea of learning right within the midst of practice, dedicated as it is to the task at hand. I make the case here that it is also the most viable way to prepare for the collective practice of management and leadership. Although I am referring to the practice of management in the text and in the title, I equate that role with leadership since they become functionally equivalent when we strip away the individualistic romanticism associated with the expression of leadership. Most tracts comparing management and leadership view the latter as the more dynamic, higher, often more ethical, form while associating both with position and authority (see, e.g., Zaleznik, 1977; Lunenburg, 2011). When viewed as a shared socially interactive phenomenon, however, they are both involved in a practice of collective agency in which those engaged in a semiotic, often dialogical, exchange, entertain the prospect of changing direction based on what they learn together (Raelin, 2014) or coordinating with one another to advance their individual or mutual projects (Gronn, 2002).

In referring to the act of preparing for leadership practice, we are plainly in the realm of what has been referred to as “leadership development.” Whereas most programs in this area concentrate on psychological properties focusing on “leader” development, leadership being seen as a person-centric experience, work-based learning is concerned with acute immersion into practices. These practices are characterized as being embedded within social relations and between people, objects, and their institutions. Further, work-based learning is a form of learning associated with lived experience that occurs within specific historical, cultural, and local contexts (Nicolini, Gherardi, and Yanow, 2003). It therefore embraces a dialectic epistemology that sees knowledge as arising from a contested interaction among a community

of inquirers rather than from a single source of expertise. It is a local interactive engagement that is emergent before the need for representation and presentation (Bakhtin 1986; Chia and Holt 2006; Schatzki 1997). In work-based learning, then, managers are not sent away to training; rather, the learning experience materializes among them as they are collectively engaged.

My reference to collective leadership is to point out that leadership in the current knowledge era is less frequently an influence relationship originating from a single individual; it occurs more often as a dynamic practice that is distributed across a range of individuals sometimes in a team setting (Denis, Langley, and Rouleau, 2010). And when it comes to work-based learning, I am signifying a form of learning emanating from any of the so-called “action modes” (Anderson et al., 2015). The action modes have as their commonality a rationale that planned engagement and collective reflection on that experience can expand and even create knowledge while at the same time serving to improve practice. Perhaps most prominent in the domain of leadership development is the mode of action learning, which makes use of action projects undertaken in teams; learning teams assembling participants working and reflecting on problems occurring within their projects and workplaces; and other interpersonal experiences, such as mentorships, which permit and encourage learning dialogues. Learning dialogues, in turn, are concerned with the surfacing, in the safe presence of trusting peers, the social, political, and even emotional reactions that might be blocking people’s personal development and operating effectiveness.

Let’s take a closer look at the nature of managerial work. In our growing knowledge era, management is increasingly tied to a particular business line and often requires a good deal of expertise. Although someone may already possess some expertise in advance of a job, it is often enriched through successive applications of knowledge accomplishing the job requirements through a seasoned knowing-in-action (McGiver et al., 2013). Further, the exercise of one’s managerial accomplishments may not be readily reportable or catalogued since it is tacit, in other words, embedded in action. Nevertheless, the practice of management

is often learnable to the extent that particular steps can be identified that can lead to a higher degree of performance.

### **How does work-based learning shape collective management practice?**

To trace the connection between work-based learning and the improvement of management practice, I'd first like to discuss what a practice is, especially versus a set of practices, and apply this distinction to management and leadership. The usage, practice, when applied to leadership tends to refer to a more efflorescent dynamic, one that suggests perpetual unfolding and meaning making. In Barad's terms (2007), it is an "intra-action" rather than an interaction in the sense that it expresses the emergent and mutual constitution of meanings through material-discursive engagement. Practices, on the other hand, tend to refer to more immutable, recurring, and even routinized sets of activities. In either instance, the practice lens would alter our traditional views of leadership because it would not rely on the attributes of individuals nor would it focus on the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers, which historically has been the starting point for any discussion of leadership.

The practice lens also considers the full range of activities and accessories to those activities (e.g., the material artifacts, the technologies, the physical arrangements, the language, the emotions, and the rituals), each brought to bear to understand the meaning of the practice in question. In this way, it differs from "relational leadership," which focuses mostly on how leadership is co-constructed in interactions and how this construction shapes further interactions and developments (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011). Rather, the practice approach depicts collective action emerging from mutual, material, discursive, sometimes recurring and sometimes evolving patterns in the moment and over time among those engaged in the practice.

When it comes to the development of collective leadership and management, therefore, it is axiomatic that we would start with managers immersed in their own practices, not taken away from their lived experience. For the sake of learning, we may prefer to accelerate the process by placing them in problem domains or dilemmas to see how they might “learn their way out!” What work-based learning seeks to develop in learners, then, is a meta-competence that transcends the application of immediate skills in order to adapt to variability in work demands. This may entail a host of unique learning processes associated with second and third-order learning that seek to uncover the underlying assumptions and presuppositions, respectively, guiding current practices. Faced with unpredictable circumstances, participants rely upon reflection-in-action and incorporate such activities as on-the-spot reframing, re-evaluation of standard practices, and spontaneous testing of available knowledge to arrive at a solution to the immediate problem (Schön, 1983; Raelin, 2008b). Their learning arises not from prepared scenarios controlled by classroom instructors but from working through the messy, implicit, and real questions of practice.

This is not to suggest that being exposed to simulated experiential activities solving problems in a classroom setting is inopportune. Classroom learning of this experiential nature can be preparatory for the ultimate application of the desired meta-cognitive critical skills in naturalistic settings. However, work-based learning sees the location of learning as shifting from a single place to the sites of collective practice, in some cases through the assistance of virtual learning (Dickenson, Burgoyne, and Pedler, 2010). Whether through virtual or face-to-face engagements, workers participate in reflective dialogue to become more critical about their work and organizational processes while concurrently enhancing their self-awareness and socio-political consciousness (Cunliffe, Forray, and Knights, 2002). Work-based learning thus makes use of spontaneous knowledge as a process to encourage its use in service of action. Through the interplay between action and feedback, learners acquire more valid social knowledge, more effective social action, and greater alignment among self-knowledge, knowledge-of-other, and action (Raelin, 2009).

Lest we conclude that work-based learning usually acknowledges participation in social systems that function with acute political tensions or which confronts workers' onus to accept current managerial orthodoxies and face real, even if subtle, performance pressures, we would be optimistic. Organizations are political entities and are not immune to attempts to colonize learning on behalf of dominant interests. Work-based learning should strive at a minimum to expose participants to the socio-cultural conditions that may constrain their self-insight (Habermas, 1971; Fournier and Grey, 2000; Raelin, 2008a). Learners can be encouraged to search for individual and collective meaning that may arise from open discourse that can raise such critical questions as: how are we relating to one another as humans; who has been excluded from our deliberations; why have we and our managers organized in the way we have; what cultural or historical processes have led to our current state (Reason, 1994; Fenwick, 2004)?

There are risks to administrative practitioners in invoking work-based learning programs. For example, the project work could lead to recommendations that might challenge current managerial roles and responsibilities. Changes in any one particular function could indirectly impact nodes in the target persons' wider social network. Work-based learning, then, requires an organizational culture of risk-taking and openness that permits occasional surfacing of ineffectual rules and practices. It works best when organizational members, including executives, agree to submit even their governing values to scrutiny.

### **What practices are developed?**

When conceiving of management as a practice available to any constellation of people working together, there are some practices that emerge within the moment not necessarily to recur on any regular basis. Others are likely to repeat and are thus "learnable." Some of these constitute ability-based skills and relate to the technical knowledge pertaining to the profession or field in question (Nemire and Meyer, 2006). There are other skills, in many cases of the meta-cognitive nature, as discussed earlier, that are generalizable across settings. Learning these in the instance of management requires not necessarily "book-learning" as it does

learning-while-doing within the actual work setting. Learning colleagues combine their diagnostic capacities with constructive feedback, and engage in extensive experimentation in cases where the practice emulates artistry more than it does protocol (McGiver et al., 2013). Some of the inherent skills and abilities fall into the realm of task activities (Carroll and Simpson, 2012; Crevani, Lindgren and Packendorf, 2010; Goldstein et al., 2010; Hazy and Uhl-Bien, 2014) that refer to the coordination necessary to get the job done:

- designing [discussing various positions on issues and then deciding on respective responsibilities – e.g., who is going to do what]
- scanning [identifying resources, such as information or technology, that can help develop a program or project or get a new one off the ground]
- mobilizing [redirecting the attention of others to work on a given project through such means as imitating, building on, modifying, ordering, or synthesizing prior or existing elements]
- weaving [creating webs of interaction across existing and new networks to focus on mutual activities and build trust].
- stabilizing [offering feedback to evaluate effectiveness, leading, in turn, to structural and behavioral changes and learning].

In addition to these task activities are affective or socio-emotional practices designed to support and sustain team or organizational members while performing their work (Bales, 1950; Marsick, 1990):

- inviting [encouraging those who have held back to participate through their ideas, their energy, and their humanity]
- unleashing [making sure that everyone who wishes to has had a chance to contribute, without fear of repercussion, even if their contribution might create discrepancy or ambiguity in the face of decision-making convergence]
- reflecting [opening public challenge to current assumptions so that everyone can learn to meet their mutual needs and interests]

There are also some generic managerial indicators of benefits derived from participation in work-based learning (see, e.g., Lewis and Marsh, 1987; Weinstein, 1995; Raelin, 2008b). In particular, participants have noted that they have learned:

- how to mobilize teams better in their work-site
- how to relate better with their colleagues, especially to listen and solicit feedback



- how to critically question their colleagues about their own problems
- how to be more open with their co-workers
- how to behave with greater confidence with senior managers
- how to be more organized
- how to take initiative in improving conditions at work
- how to take on more responsibility in their role
- how to monitor operations more effectively

### **Why does work-based learning shape collective management practice?**

Work-based learning develops particular habits and attitudes that give rise to an appreciation of management or leadership as a collective process that extends beyond the individual. It develops in participants a peripheral awareness of one another. They see value in sharing leadership. In both the project and learning team features of work-based learning, team members begin to make use of the team's resources and recognize the strengths and weaknesses of others, e.g.: who provides support to team members in need, who fosters team spirit, who knows where to find answers to the most intractable of problems, who explores and reports on opportunities outside the team. These issues are learning issues. Work-based learning does not insist that they be lodged within any one person; rather, they become the knowledge responsibilities of the entire team.

The reflective features of work-based learning also enhance dialogic understanding which incorporates three explicit practices (Raelin, 2013). First, it brings about nonjudgmental inquiry. Participants are encouraged to express genuine curiosity about others' suggestions and to avoid maintaining hidden intents. Second, participants are encouraged to submit their own ideas and views to the critical scrutiny of others. In this way, they become receptive to challenge to their own ways of thinking, even to discovering the limitations of how they think and act. Third, they entertain the view that something new or unique might arise from a mutual inquiry that could reconstruct everyone's view of reality in an entirely new way. They are willing to disturb their own preconceived world views on behalf of a common good.

A by-product of dialogue in work-based learning is an appreciation of other cultures and a sensitivity toward views that are less privileged than those in the dominant culture. As a grass-roots form of learning, work-based learning emphasizes such critical democratic values as humility and sustainability. Participants appreciate any social transformation because they participate in it and see their contribution as dependent on others. By bridging their inner and outer worlds, they act with integrity in any effort to heal the ecological, economic, and social systems in which they live.

### **Application**

Let's conclude with a short case to exemplify the work-based learning principles presented here for both educators and practitioners. It is intended to demonstrate how the strategic choice of a leadership development experience may have a pervasive effect on the nature of the management practice within the system in question. The case has been chosen because it combines two comparable incidents, one which employs a standard competency training approach, the other a work-based learning intervention. For simplicity purposes, the scenarios have been combined into one case. It takes place in an operations unit within a large urban health center. Unit staff were miserable working under the thumb of an imperial supervisor. The tide was about to turn, however, because there was news of this supervisor's impending retirement as well as her replacement by a much "kinder and gentler" supervisor. As it turns out, the original supervisor was indeed replaced and staff were excited by the new supervisor – let's call her Karen – because she was interested in sharing leadership. They enjoyed the new approach, but it didn't last long. In due course, the staff began to resent having to take on managerial responsibilities because they felt it was the supervisor's job. Many of them "reported" her to management. The vice-president of operations decided to take action and let Karen go while conducting an exit interview. The VP asked her why she hadn't implemented many of the core competencies endorsed during the center's Middle Management Development Program. Among the competencies were to establish a firm vision, sustain commitment to the vision, and align staff to the vision. Karen responded that she felt it

important to get everyone involved in the visioning process while spreading unit responsibilities to all the staff. In his notes subsequent to the supervisor's release, the VP wrote that Karen was not a credible leader because she did not know how to take control and run the unit as any good manager should. She did not have the necessary competencies of an effective leader. This scenario demonstrates the at times futility of teaching skills and competencies detached from the very dynamic processes in which managers may be currently engaged. In adopting a "best practice" competency approach, it gives priority to pre-existing applications that are locally universalized though at times detached from experiences on the ground.

In contrast to the above scenario, let's look at an alternative that illustrates how the principles advocated in this article can help to support more positive outcomes through privileging unfolding relations and processes. In particular, it shows how to apply the principles by placing participants in leadership development into the very throes of their everyday lived experiences rather than in leader development focusing on cognitive processing. Let's pick up the case when Karen arrives but rather than take the training course, she enlists in a work-based learning program with other middle managers. This program enrolls middle managers who are asked to bring up particular problems in their practice for mutual sharing, reflection, and in some cases, for "just-in-time" short training. Each participant also has the services of a coach to work with him or her on individual development. Karen presents to her learning team her interest in sharing leadership, while acknowledging that her staff have operated under an autocratic supervisor for some 15 years prior to her arrival. She receives nearly unanimous feedback from her learning teammates as well as from her coach that although she has a very credible idea, she will need to determine how to help them make a steady transition to a more collective management practice. She had not realized how long it may take for people to develop both an appreciation for and an ability to adopt democratic methods. Through both individual and peer coaching, she learned that she needed to be gradual in her approach, initially taking small steps (engaging her staff in effective two-way communication, dialogue, and reflection; giving them a chance to try out some self- and team-management practices, etc.). In the end, Karen and her staff became a highly regarded team and a model for collective

leadership throughout the health center. She was given a chance to practice her democratic reflex by fully commissioning the feedback of her peers who engaged her via a dialogic process that encouraged her to explore her social action. In the end, the talent of Karen no. 2 was saved for the health center by a form of learning that both emulated and reinforced a collective leadership ripe for contemporary management practice.

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